



The Message: The Invisible Fence

Down came the blanket with those creepy, crawling snakes and vultures and other weird animals on it. The blanket is lowered three times. And each time the blanket descended, Peter said, "No, not me!"

Peter's response to God's picnic invitation was not mere squeamishness. Peter found the menu repulsive. None of those animals was acceptable food. Peter's "no" welled up from deep within him. An observant Jew, Peter had spent a lifetime trying to remain ritually clean. His "no" to the heavenly invitation was visceral, reactive, the result of years of religious conditioning.

When we moved into our present home, my dad and I installed a lovely wood screen door to the back yard. And we spent a lot of time putting a pet door in for our bichon, Agatha. We figured it would be easy to train her to use the door with a treat. Not so. We needed one person to hold the treat and another to push her through the door. She didn't get groomed often, so she was a fluffy little thing, and I began to realise the feel of the sides of the door on her fur were freaking her out. So I trimmed her down to her svelt 12 pounds. But the damage was done. Just the memory of the feel on her fur was enough. She never used that door once on her own. She saw that door as an obstacle to her freedom and there was nothing we could do to convince her otherwise. All that work and it now took two people to get her outside.

In our passage from Acts, the blanket from heaven carried with it the promise of God's unimaginable generosity for all humankind. God's blanket was blotting out the boundary between Jew and Gentile, a boundary that God found unnecessary. But thought of crossing that boundary and being among the unclean was repulsive to Peter, even as the feel of that pet door on her fur was repulsive to Agatha. It was as if there was one of those invisible pet fences right across the doorway.

Tradition and laws around ritual cleanliness made table fellowship with the Gentiles strictly taboo. For Peter, Gentiles were as unclean as the weird cuisine in his dream.

'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' God tells Peter in his dream. 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.'

But Peter refused God's invitation to get up and eat, three times. Earlier in Acts we learned that Peter awoke pondering the meaning of the dream, but remained frozen at least at first behind an invisible fence buried deep within the reptilian part of his brain.

While I was preparing this sermon, my daughter texted a note she sent to her daughter's baseball team manager. She was challenging their decision to book the team picture right in the usual worship time for Christians. She suggested that it would be more inclusive to avoid Saturday or Sunday mornings for things like team pictures and hinted at the charter right people of faith have not to be penalized for their faith. Even though no one has ever said to me, 'hockey got me through my mother's death,' a huge proportion of the population has shifted their commitments and loyalties away from faith to other things.

Freedom to practice our faith is a charter right. But Canadian Christians have let that right be taken from us already in our desire to involve our children in other activities to the sacrifice of their religious upbringing. As a result, a precious few enlightened souls bring their children to church. Okay, rant over.

But in this era of walling up borders, and suppressing religious freedom, Peter's dream is cautionary. What may look repulsive, may actually be life giving, life saving!

When Brazilian Christians began to participate in local bible studies, they encountered the teaching not to eat pork. Through the lens of liberation theology, they saw that this was a teaching that protected the people from unsafe meat. Knowing that pork was safe to eat in their community, they decided that God was teaching them to eat pork. The important lesson was that God was a protective God.

Brenda Zimmerman, a gifted professor, faithful Christian and wonderful mother of two, was tragically killed in an accident much too young. Her young daughter said this at her funeral:

"Mom always talked about how there were two types of families – Fortress vs Oasis families. Where Garrison families' separate themselves and put up barriers to not allow new members, Oasis families open themselves up...new people are welcomed in and the family grows and strengthens with the new additions.

I think it is very clear, by the more than 40 family members sitting in these front rows here today, that our mother ran an Oasis family.

She taught us both about the importance of love and compassion and about the beauty of letting others into our lives."

Brenda started out with two children, acquired three step children and became guardian to two more, then two more. She enfolded all 9 and their partners into her oasis family.

Aren't we all bounded by invisible fences? I know that I am. And it seems that God makes great sport of revealing those fences to me from time to time.

Peter moved across the boundary only after his encounter with particular people. Only then did Peter understand that God shows no favoritism.

God's world view challenges our invisible fences. When we accept the challenge, and push past our invisible fences we have the possibility of creating oasis families, and like Peter, we can open ourselves to spreading the Good News of God's vision for our world.